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1971 Mystery

CIA Link to Cuban Pig Virus Reported

New York

With at least the tacit backing of U.S. Central Intelligence Agency officials, operatives linked to anti-Castro terrorists introduced African swine fever virus into Cuba in 1971.

Six weeks later an outbreak of the disease forced the slaughter of 500,000 pigs to prevent a nationwide animal epidemic.

A U.S. intelligence source told Newsday last week he was given the virus in a sealed, unmarked container at a U.S. Army base and CIA training ground in the Panama Canal Zone, with instructions to turn it over to the anti-Castro group.

The 1971 outbreak, the first and only time the disease has hit the Western Hemisphere, was labeled the "most alarming event" of 1971 by the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization. African swine fever is a highly contagious and usually lethal viral disease that infects only pigs and, unlike swine flu, cannot be transmitted to humans.

All production of pork, a Cuban staple, halted, apparently for several months.

A CIA spokesman, Dennis Berend, in response to a Newsday request for comment, said, "We don't comment on information from unnamed and, at best, obscure sources."

Why the virus turned up in Cuba has been a mystery to animal investigators ever since the outbreak. Informed speculation assumed that the virus entered Cuba either in garbage from a commercial airliner or in sausages brought in by merchant seamen.

However, on the basis of numerous interviews over four months with U.S. intelligence sources, Cuban exiles and scientists concerning the outbreak — which occurred two years after then-President Nixon had banned the use of offensive chemical and biological warfare — Newsday was able to piece together this account of events leading up to the outbreak.

The U.S. intelligence source said that early in 1971 he was given the virus in a sealed, unmarked container at Ft. Gulick, an Army base in the Panama Canal Zone. The CIA also operates a paramilitary training center for career personnel and mercenaries at Ft. Gulick.

The source said he was given instructions to turn the container with the virus over to members of an anti-Castro group.

The container then was given to a person in the Canal Zone, who took it by boat and turned it over to persons aboard a fishing trawler off the Panamanian coast. The source said the substance was not identified to him until months after the outbreak in Cuba. He would not elaborate further.

Another man involved in the operation, a Cuban exile who asked not to be identified, said he was on the trawler when the virus was put aboard at a rendezvous point off Bocas del Toro, Panama. He said the trawler carried the virus to Navassa Island, a tiny, deserted, U.S.-owned island between Jamaica and Haiti. From there, after the trawler made a brief stopover, the container was taken to Cuba and given to other operatives on the southern coast near the U.S. Navy base at Guantanamo Bay in late March, according to the source on the trawler. The base is 100 miles due

north of Navassa.

The source on the trawler, who had been trained by the CIA and had carried out previous missions for the agency, said he saw no CIA officials aboard the boat that delivered the virus to the trawler off Panama, but added: "We were well paid for this and Cuban exile groups don't have that kind of money . . ."

He said he was revealing the information because he is a member of an exile group being investigated by the United States in connection with terrorist activity in Florida. His account was confirmed by another intelligence source in Miami. The source said he had no proof that the operation was approved by CIA officials in Washington, but added: "In a case like this, though, they would always give them (CIA officials in Washington) plausible deniability."

The investigation referred to by the operative on the trawler involves a federal inquiry into terrorist acts allegedly carried out by Cuban exiles. Those include bombings and assassination attempts in the United States and Venezuela. Trained originally by the CIA for operations against Cuba, the exiles have become more restive as they view what they believe to be an increasing move toward rapprochement between Fidel Castro and the United States.

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